

GAS GENERATING SYSTEM FOR A FUEL CELL SYSTEM AND METHOD
OF OPERATING A GAS GENERATING SYSTEM

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This application claims the priority of German Patent Document No. 101 04 607.3-41, filed February 2, 2001, the disclosure of which is expressly incorporated by reference herein.

[0002] The present invention relates to a gas generating system for a fuel cell system as well as to a method of operating a gas generating system according to the preamble of the independent claims.

[0003] The various components of a gas generating system, such as the reformers, selective oxidation stages, catalytic burners, require a certain operating temperature for their function, for example, at least 200EC for reforming reactors. For the start of a gas generating system, the components have to be heated to the operating temperature. The heating by means of electric energy is not expedient because of the poor efficiency. In addition, the available electric energy (mainly in vehicles) may be too low for starting the system. Furthermore, the starting time should be as short as possible.

[0004] Japanese Patent Document JP 8-133701A teaches providing an excess of oxygen into the catalyst to provide rapid warming for the cold start of a selective oxidation catalyst, so that, in addition to carbon monoxide, hydrogen is also oxidized.

[0005] German Patent Document DE 19825772 A1 teaches rapidly preheating a vapor reformer at the start by means of a heating element and subsequently feeding oxygen, together with methanol and water vapor, to the reformer in order to immediately start conversion reactions. After the operating temperature has been reached, the oxygen supply may be stopped.

[0006] Finally, German Patent Document DE 3345958 A1 teaches burning methanol with air guiding the hot combustion waste gases for the heat exchange along the catalyst bed in order to subsequently guide them directly through the catalyst bed. When the operating temperature of 480EC has been reached, hydrogen of the fuel cell exhaust gas is used for the heating in order to maintain the required cracking temperature.

[0007] It is an object of the present invention to provide a method for a gas generating system for a fuel cell system to start the system as fast as possible, and to provide an appropriately further developed gas generating system. The fuel cell system can be used to supply electricity to any device that consumes electricity, such as the electric motor of a vehicle. In particular, during the starting phase, hydrogen-containing fuel should be made available to the fuel cell system as fast as possible and the exhaust gas emissions should be limited to an acceptable reliable amount.

[0008] This object is achieved by means of the embodiments of the invention described below.

[0009] In the method according to the invention, for starting the operation of the gas generating system, at least one of the catalytic burners is started and the heat generated by the burner is used for the evaporation of water and of the hydrocarbons (to be fed to the reformer), such as methanol, and for heating a partial reformer connected to the reformer. The partial reformer operates with a lower throughput than the actual reformer of the gas generating system. Instead of the partial reformer, a partial oxidation stage (POX) may be used to convert fed hydrocarbons, such as methanol by means of an oxidant, such as air, to form a hydrogen-containing gas. In this case, the heating of the components takes place essentially by way of the chemical reaction of combustion media so that, for starting the system, only limited electric energy from a vehicle battery is required.

[0010] As a result, the method according to the invention can bring at least some of the components of the gas generating system to the operating temperature within a short time. The partial reforming unit or partial oxidation unit supplies reformat or hydrogen-containing gas which is purified with respect to carbon monoxide in a selective oxidation stage connected on the output side. The operation of the fuel cell can be started by means of the purified hydrogen-containing gas. The fuel cell generates current so that a driving operation becomes possible in the case of a vehicle and the auxiliary aggregates of the fuel cell system, such as compressors, are now fed by the fuel cell and no longer by the electric auxiliary energy, such as the vehicle battery. The hot gases or waste gases of the already heated components continuously heat the

remaining components. Another advantage is that, also during the cold start of the system, undesirable emissions can be prevented because the emissions can be converted by the catalytic burner or burners.

[0011] The invention is particularly suitable for vehicles which are equipped with a fuel cell system.

[0012] Other objects, advantages and novel features of the present invention will become apparent from the following detailed description of the invention when considered in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0013] Figure 1 is a schematic view of a preferred construction for operating a gas generating system according to the invention for a fuel cell system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0014] Figure 1 illustrates a fuel cell system with a fuel cell unit 3 which is supplied with hydrogen-containing combustion gas by a gas generating system. The gas generating system has the following components: a reformer 1 for reforming a combustion medium, such as hydrocarbons, alcohols, and ether. The hydrogen-containing reformat contains carbon monoxide. Since carbon monoxide poisons fuel cells, it is necessary to reduce the carbon monoxide fraction in the reformat to below 50 ppm, preferably to below 10 ppm. For this purpose, at least one selective oxidation stage 2 is provided to oxidize catalytically carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide. The oxygen required for this

purpose may be supplied in the form of air by way of the air pipe 10. The purified hydrogen-containing reformat is fed to the anode side 11 of the fuel cell unit 3. The oxidant, such as air, arrives by way of the pipe 13 in the cathode side 12 of the fuel cell unit 3. The waste gases of the fuel cell unit 3, essentially water as well as electrochemically non-converted hydrogen, are discharged by way of a pipe 4. A water separator may be provided in this pipe.

[0015] Furthermore, a catalytic burner 5 is coupled with an evaporator 6. In the evaporator 6, combustion medium and/or water is evaporated in order to feed these media to the reformer 1 and to a connected partial reforming or POX unit 7. In the catalytic burner 5, the hydrogen of the anode waste gas is exothermally converted to water in the normal operation. For this purpose, hydrogen is fed to the catalytic burner 5 by way of the pipe 4, and the generated heat arrives by way of a heat exchange at the evaporator 6, to which the media to be evaporated are fed by way of a pipe 9.

[0016] According to the invention, the partial oxidation stage 7 (POX) or the partial reforming unit 7 coupled with a catalytic burner are provided as additional components of the gas generating system. The partial reforming or partial oxidation stage 7 may be connected in front of or behind the reformer 1. The air containing oxygen required for the reforming is fed by way of the pipe 8 to the partial reforming unit 7, while combustion media, such as methanol and water vapor, are fed by the evaporator 6. When a POX stage 7 is used, the combustion medium (methanol), together with air containing oxygen, are

converted directly. The partial reforming unit 7 may be coupled with a separate catalytic burner or with the catalytic burner 5. It is also possible to provide a catalytic burner which heats the evaporator 6 and/or the partial reforming unit 7 by means of hot gas.

[0017] According to the invention, first, the at least one catalytic burner 5 and/or that of the partial reforming unit 7 of the gas generating system is started, and the heating can be provided at the starting point optionally by electric assistance. Electric power of a vehicle battery existing in the vehicle is preferably used for this purpose.

[0018] A combustion medium, such as the alcohol used for reforming, preferably methanol, is fed to the catalytic burner 5. Hydrogen from a hydrogen tank may also be used. The heat released during the exothermal conversion of the combustion medium is used for the evaporation of the combustion medium (such as methanol) to be fed to the reformer 1. If the combustion medium cannot immediately be fed to the reformer 1 of the gas generating system, it is fed to a correspondingly designed partial reforming stage 7. This partial reformer 7 is in a heat exchange with the catalytic burner 5 and/or with another catalytic burner, so that a rapid lighting-off of the reforming is ensured. According to the invention, instead of the partial reformer 7, a partial oxidation stage 7 (POX) may be used in which the evaporated combustion medium is directly reacted with air. The partial oxidation stage 7 is heated parallel with the catalytic

burner 5 or burners. This takes place by the reaction of combustion medium (liquid or gaseous) with air.

[0019] After the starting of the fuel cell system, hydrogen-containing anode waste gas of the fuel cell unit 3 can be used for the further supply of the catalytic burner 5 or burners.

[0020] There are various phases during the starting of the fuel cell system. The system goes through a warm-up phase, which may be followed by a phase of reduced power, until the normal operation is finally reached. In the phase of reduced power, preferably only 20% - 80% of the maximal system power of the normal operation is generated. In the warm-up phase, the components which are required for the operation at a reduced power are first brought to the operating temperature, preferably by the combustion of a combustion medium, such as methanol or hydrogen. After the warm-up phase, in the operationally warm stage, such as a unit for implementing a partial oxidation of the combustion medium or a combined unit with a catalytic burner/reformer, a reformat is produced and is optionally purified with respect to carbon monoxide in a stage for the selective oxidation which is connected on the output side of the reformer. The fuel cell can start its operation with the purified reformat and generates current so that a driving operation is possible, and auxiliary aggregates of the fuel cell system are fed by the fuel cell and no longer by an electric auxiliary source, such as a vehicle battery. Simultaneously, a further heating-up of the remaining components takes place.

[0021] If the phase of reduced power is skipped, however, the starting time of the fuel cell system reduced according to the invention will be slightly prolonged.

[0022] During the warm-up phase according to the invention, first, components, which are required for the operation at reduced power, are preferably heated to their operating temperature. For the start of the operation of the gas generating system, a fuel, such as the methanol to be reformed, is now fed to the catalytic burner 5 for this purpose. If the partial reforming unit 7 has a separate catalytic burner, or a separate catalytic burner is provided for heating the evaporator 6 and the partial reforming unit 7, the can be implemented also by means of these components. In any case, at least one catalytic burner is started first. The starting of the catalytic burner or burners ensures that undesirable emissions of the cold system can be reduced or prevented because the catalytic burner or burners can largely convert them.

[0023] In the further development described below, it is assumed that the partial reforming unit 7 is heated by the catalytic burner 5. It is also possible to use hydrogen from the hydrogen reservoir as combustion medium for the catalytic burner 5. The heat generated by the exothermal catalytic conversion is conveyed to the evaporator 6. It should be pointed out that the evaporator 6 may also be constructed as a hot-gas evaporator with a catalytic burner connected on the input side. The catalytic burner 5 may optionally be briefly heated by means of electric assistance during the start. The catalytic burner 5 may also be constructed in several stages.

[0024] According to the invention, a portion of the heat generated in the catalytic burner 5 is supplied to the partial reforming unit 7 in order to heat the latter. The combustion medium supplied by the evaporator 6 and the water vapor are fed together with air from the feeding pipe 8 to the partial reforming unit 7, where a hydrogen-containing reformat is produced. Likewise, it is possible to use a partial oxidation (POX) stage 7 in order to produce a hydrogen-containing gas. By way of the still cold reformer 1, the heated gas arrives in the selective oxidation stage 2 in which it is catalytically purified with respect to carbon monoxide. In order to be able to react higher amounts of carbon monoxide in the selective oxidation stage 2, the selective oxidation stage 2 can be preheated by providing an additional quantity of air oxygen by way of the line 10 so that a portion of the reformat is burned to generate heat. Subsequently, hydrogen-containing purified reformat arrives on the anode side 11 of the fuel cell 3 which can immediately be used for generating current in the phase of reduced power following the warm-up phase. In the reduced-power phase, the fuel cell 3 generates only approximately 20% to 80% of the maximal system power.

[0025] During the phase of reduced power, additional components are heated up. In addition to the adding of more air to the preheating of the selective oxidation stage 2, another oxidant may also be added. A portion of the introduced reformat will burn up as a result of the addition of oxidant. Additional air and/or fuel (such as methanol) can also be added into the catalytic burner 5. Furthermore, a continuous heating of the components of the gas generating

system takes place indirectly or directly by way of the hot gases or waste gases of the already heated components.

[0026] In the phase of reduced power, the maximally available power of the fuel cell system is continuously increased corresponding to the heating of the components until all components of the gas generating system have reached the operating temperature. In the normal operation, the full power of the system can then be utilized.

[0027] After the lighting-off of the fuel cells, anode waste gas can be fed to the catalytic burner 5 by way of the pipe 4, so that the fuel quantity to be fed from outside of system can be correspondingly reduced. In normal operation, the catalytic burner 5 is preferably operated by anode waste gas.

[0028] Another possibility of ensuring a start particularly at low temperature is the connecting of a cold-start component in front of one or several components of the gas generating system to be heated. This cold-starting component may optionally also be integrated in the stage to be heated. Conceivable cold-starting components are adiabatic catalytic burners or flame burners. These may possibly additionally be equipped with an electric starting device, such as a glow plug and/or spark plug, an additional air apportioning or an additional fuel apportioning. Another possibility includes the connection of a central cold-starting component on the input side, which cold-starting component heats several reactors in parallel.

[0029] The schematically illustrated construction may be supplemented by additional components. In particular, cold-starting components, such as adiabatic catalytic burners or flame burners may be provided which, for a start at low temperatures, generate heat as fast as possible by chemical reaction or combustion of fuels. These cold-starting components may be integrated in the components of the gas generating system which are to be heated.

[0030] The invention permits a fast start of the operation of a fuel cell system for generating current also at low temperatures. The catalytic burner provided for the reduction of exhaust gas emissions can limit the emissions to an acceptable amount as early as during the starting phase. Simultaneously, the catalytic burner allows the evaporation of the constituents required for the reforming and the preheating of a partial reforming unit or a POX stage in order to be able to generate a hydrogen-containing gas.

[0031] The foregoing disclosure has been set forth merely to illustrate the invention and is not intended to be limiting. Since modifications of the disclosed embodiments incorporating the spirit and substance of the invention may occur to persons skilled in the art, the invention should be construed to include everything within the scope of the appended claims and equivalents thereof.